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SUBJECT: US Hostage Takers In Iran:
Where Are They Today?
NESA M 86-20122

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US Hostage Takers In Iran: Where Are They Today?

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Summary

Many of the Islamic militants who seized the US Embassy in Tehran in November 1979 and held US diplomats hostage for over 14 months hold high-level positions in the Iranian Government. Several dominate the political affairs section of the Foreign Ministry, where they nurture each other's careers and influence Iranian foreign policy. The militants' "spiritual leader" serves as chief state prosecutor. The militants are key representatives of Iran's radical factions that generally support violent export of the Islamic revolution, continuation of the war with Iraq, and uncompromising opposition to normalization of relations with the United States. The status of the militants probably is an important indicator of the direction of Iran's foreign and domestic policies. A lessening of their role could be a measure of the regime's desire for better relations with the United States.

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Hosein Sheikh-ol-Eslam, one of the instigators of the Embassy takeover and a member of the militants' leadership council, today serves as Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs, a position he won as a direct result of his role in the hostage episode. He is the most influential of the hostage takers and a powerful proponent of a radical foreign policy.

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This paper was prepared by Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, Persian Gulf Division. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division,

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Sheikh-ol-Eslam's radical faction is involved in constant infighting with conservatives in the Ministry who oppose the radicals' approach to foreign policy. The conservatives oppose violent export of the revolution and adhere to traditional norms of diplomatic behavior. Trying to maintain some distance between these two groups is a pragmatist faction led by Foreign Minister Velayati, willing to adopt whatever policies seem to further Iran's national interests. On most issues the pragmatists have sided with conservatives to curb radical excesses. Khomeini has followed his usual practice of attempting to maintain a rough balance between the radicals and conservatives. In a speech in 1984, he curbed the power of the radicals by calling for Iran to have normal diplomatic and political relations with most countries.

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Khomeini's guidelines have allowed the pragmatists to broaden Iran's international ties, especially to Western Europe, but Sheikh-ol-Eslam continues to wield considerable influence over Iran's relations with Third World countries and with Islamic fundamentalist movements worldwide.

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Recent administrative changes have shown Sheikh-ol-Eslam's continuing clout.

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All but one of the 10 current department chiefs reportedly are Sheikh-ol-Eslam's loyalists who were involved in the seizure of the US Embassy. Skeikh-ol-Eslam recently promoted one of these, Ibrahim Rahimpur, from department chief to Director General for Asian and Pacific Countries. Rahimpur's predecessor, Ali Ahani, became Director General for the Americas and European countries, handling relations both with the US and the USSR. Ahani's predecessor, Mohammad Reza Sadr--also a hostage taker--assumed a high-level position in the Interior Ministry.

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Several of Sheikh-ol-Eslam's proteges--all hostage takers--have become ambassadors. Kia Tabatabai, assigned to the Foreign Ministry's protocol department soon after the hostages' release, has served in Moscow since 1983. Ayatollah Hadi Khosrow-Shahi served as ambassador to the Vatican until mid 1986, and currently is special adviser to the Minister of Islamic Guidance. We lack conclusive evidence to

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confirm press reports that while in Rome he was a linchpin in Iranian terrorist activity in Western Europe. In any event, he was an important figure in Iran's propaganda network.

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Mehdi Ahari Mostafavi, identified as a guard during the hostage takeover, was appointed a UN delegate in 1981 and then headed the Foreign Ministry's Western Europe department before being appointed in 1985 to his current position as Ambassador to Austria and Iranian representative to the United Nations Industrial Development Organization in Vienna. In an interview on Austrian television, Mostafavi denied involvement in the hostage incident.

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Ali Reza Salari has had a rapid rise in Iran's foreign service. A radio announcer during the revolution, he became deputy chief of the Foreign Ministry department responsible for Western Europe in 1983, chief two years later, ambassador to Belgium in 1985, and this year assumed the additional positions of ambassador to the European Community and to Luxembourg. Western diplomats describe him as intelligent but prone to using Islamic rhetoric in conversation. When Belgium, earlier this year, closed the Iranian cultural center in Brussels because of its suspected role in propaganda and intelligence activities, Salari publicly warned that the safety of Belgian diplomats in Tehran could not be guaranteed.

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Another hostage taker, Javad Mansuri, has used his post as Deputy Foreign Minister for Consular and Cultural Affairs to establish a separate power center in the Foreign Ministry. Mansuri's influence stems from contacts within the Revolutionary Guard, which he once headed, and from his position as a member of the Central Committee of the Islamic Revolutionary Party, Iran's only legal party. A religious zealot, Mansuri oversees many cultural propaganda programs that actively promote export of the revolution. He also controls scholarships and exit permits for students studying abroad, duties which extend his influence beyond foreign policy.

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Although both Mansuri and Sheikh-ol-Eslam are radicals and often in conflict with Velayati, they sometimes compete with each other for influence within the Foreign Ministry.

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The Hostage Takers' Guru

Mohammad Asgar Musavi-Khoiniha, a radical Islamic fundamentalist ideologue, functioned as spiritual adviser to the hostage takers. After the hostage crisis ended in 1981, he was elected to the first post-revolutionary parliament and served as one of its deputy speakers. He then became a personal adviser to Khomeini and organizer of the annual pilgrimage of Iranians to Mecca. Khoiniha's ambition was to run for president in 1985, but Khomeini prevented Khoiniha and other radicals from running. Khomeini wanted to maintain the existing balance among regime factions by keeping in power the more moderate incumbent, Ali Musavi-Khamenei.

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[redacted]

As a consolation, Khomeini in July 1985 appointed Khoiniha as Iran's prosecutor general. Khoiniha has used the post as a platform to push his leftist-oriented policies, waging a campaign to imprison Iranians who attempt to reclaim property seized by the Islamic regime after the Shah's overthrow. [redacted]

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Khoiniha has focused on persons who have returned after fleeing Iran when the clerics took over. Khoiniha's campaign has angered both more moderate officials who support the return of illegally seized property as one means of encouraging private entrepreneurship; and other radicals--including Prime Minister Musavi--who are attempting to attract back to Iran expatriates possessing critically needed technical expertise. These tensions are likely to persist with no clear winner as long as the regime continues to postpone making a definitive decision about the relative role to be accorded the private sector and the state in the economy. [redacted]

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Outlook

The hostage takers' successful careers indicate the continuing influence of their revolutionary ideology and hardline anti-US stance. None has shown any sign of having second thoughts about his role in the embassy seizure. They usually turn aside interviewers' questions about guilt or apologies by justifying their actions on grounds that the US used the embassy as an espionage center and engaged in criminal acts under the Shah. [redacted]

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Iranian radicals, including the hostage takers, are contending for power with moderate and conservative groups. The coalitions are roughly evenly matched, with Khomeini wielding ultimate authority. Factional infighting will intensify after Khomeini dies. Regardless of who emerges on top, the hostage takers are likely to continue to occupy key positions and wield considerable influence in determining policy. [redacted]

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One way the regime could signal clearly a desire for better relations with the United States would be to remove some or all of the hostage takers from important positions, especially those that involve them directly in determining policy toward the US. The diminution of the hostage takers' influence over time also would improve the prospects for better relations. [redacted]

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